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THE COUNTY ASSOCIATION AND ITS RELATION TO THE STATE *

By KATHARINE DEWITT, R.N.

IN these days of organization life, it is almost an impossibility for a man or woman to carry on any trade, business, or profession successfully alone. It seems to be a natural instinct of human beings which draws those of like views together to brush up each others' wits, to shake each other out of lethargy, to stimulate each other to new ambitions, and, possibly, to accomplish some definite good for the community. This last is not so easily brought about as those first named, yet a nurses' association ought to stand in a helpful relation to the public. It should be a pioneer in many hygienic or social reforms, the strong supporter of measures for the public good mapped out by the medical societies.

How far short of this ideal do we come? Many people are surprised at knowing there are nursing associations. "What! a convention of trained nurses? How funny! What do you talk about?"

Our pre-occupation with our own affairs up to this time is natural and partly excusable. Our first years of organization life were spent in knowing ourselves. Then came years of strenuous effort for registration. After this is accomplished and is working well there has come, to almost every society with which I am familiar, a lull, a resting on the oars. Those who were leaders in the legislative battles feel that they have earned a rest. Their successors are not yet ready to step into their shoes. Often there is criticism back and forth,—and in some communities, alas, a decided falling out,—and all because that old adage still holds true of Satan and idle hands. It is difficult to keep up enthusiasm and interest when there is no special work on hand.

Individually, we are *not* idle. Each of us is probably almost overburdened with the daily tasks which fall to her in her small corner of the nursing field. It is in our association life that we grow deadly dull and inert, so that many a nurse withdraws in disgust from the society with which she should be identified, feeling that it is of no benefit to her. It is quite sadly true that if our meetings are not interesting, they will not be attended. Where lies the remedy?

Must we manufacture new interests to keep ourselves busy or are there questions of importance still remaining unsettled to which we should give our earnest attention?

* Read at the New Hampshire State Nurses' Association. June, 1909.

Let me mention a few, all closely related, and all of such pressing need that we cannot postpone our consideration of them: central directories, visiting nursing, the care of people of moderate means, tuberculosis work, almshouse nursing, the Red Cross.

All of us who have had anything to do with modern social or philanthropic work know that as a result of experience there is a wide-spread effort toward centralization of work. In cities where several different societies are dealing with problems of the care of the poor or matters that concern the public health, the results are not nearly so good as in those which have brought their forces together into one society, dividing, systematizing, harmonizing the work.

If we, as nursing bodies, are to attack such tremendous problems as those I have named, we ought to go about it in the best way, not wasting years of more or less fruitless effort in learning how, but profiting by the experience of others. In any community no really efficient work can be done unless all the nursing forces are concentrated and are pulling together, working in harmony, not each of several organizations attacking the problem feebly by itself.

The medical societies, which have years more of experience behind them than we, have found the county society the most convenient and effective working unit, and it seems reasonable that it should be so.

Suppose the case of a large city. Here the county society would be practically a city association, but if it bears the county name it would include all nurses within the county limits and its usefulness would be so much the wider. On the other hand, suppose a part of a state rather sparsely populated, with one large county seat. Here the county association, though bearing the name of the county having the county seat, should embrace in its limits several counties, including all convenient outlying regions with headquarters at the county seat.

All the problems I have enumerated are local quite as much as state affairs. That is, they should be undertaken in every community where there are enough nurses to band together and work; they are too scattered for the state association as a whole to handle, though the state may well act as the inspirer and director of all.

Can such work be done by individuals? Yes, to some extent, but not effectively or thoroughly. Can it be done by the *alumnæ* associations? Yes, but if you happen to have in some one city several *alumnæ* associations and the same problem, what a pity not to unite to solve it! But if the cities alone undertake the work, what will there be for the scattered nurses in the small towns?

You will see, I hope, what the special place of the county association

is. I do not wish to urge upon you the formation of such associations, for no outsider can judge the situation for you, but if I can give you a clear picture of their mission you can better judge whether they are suited to your needs.

Their service to the nurses of a community is this, that they gather together the graduates of various schools and give them wider interests than they would have in attending only to the affairs of their own school. Also, it makes a place for any nurses from distant schools who may be in the community, putting them in touch with the others. Their service to the community is that it receives organized systematic nursing service instead of haphazard efforts.

I do not think *alumnæ* associations should be abolished. There is a fellowship and home feeling which it is good to preserve, and there are certain home interests to be maintained, such as a sick benefit fund, or an endowed room. A yearly banquet at which all the old graduates of a school gather to meet the new ones, and a Christmas frolic, with occasional meetings for necessary business, would in most cases serve the purpose of the *alumnæ* association, leaving the members free to throw their energy and enthusiasm into the county association without conflicting claims. The *alumnæ* association does much good up to a certain point in nurses' development; after that it may be narrowing, holding its members to too small a circle of interests. The woman whose interests are too confined is the one who opposes changes needed for professional progress. Most of our leaders the country over have been women who were by circumstances separated from their first nursing home and whose interests have broadened as they have seen wider horizons.

If the county association and the local *alumnæ* associations both hold monthly meetings, the county meeting is pretty sure to be neglected; if both meet quarterly, the *alumnæ* is still in the ascendant; if the county meeting is held monthly, and the *alumnæ* meetings quarterly, more good will be accomplished.

Now let us go back to our nursing problems and build for ourselves a castle in the air such as I suppose none of us will ever behold in reality.

Here are several counties united in one association with a thriving town as headquarters. The work is organized for the good of the community and also for the professional and educational advantage of the nurses. The first effort will be to establish a central directory, where registered nurses can be distinguished from those not registered, where doctors and patients will be educated, and nurses too, to the advantages of registration. The superintendents of the few hospitals situated in the district, being members of the county association and inspired by

its ideals, will give up their separate school directories and so help the work to start properly. The directory will be in the hands of a graduate nurse and will supply not only the town but the surrounding country. Perhaps it will admit to its lists the best practical nurses, those who can come well recommended, recognizing their good qualities and helping them to find proper employment.

After the directory has become so well established that there need be no further anxiety concerning it, the members will begin to plan for a visiting nurse association and will combine it with the directory, either by placing both under the same management or by having both housed in the same building and co-operating in every way.

When these two are working harmoniously and are self-supporting, it will be time to attempt to solve that most difficult problem of supplying nurses to the middle class. The whole community must be aroused to help in this as in the visiting nurse work. Nurses working by the hour should be added to the visiting nurse staff, who should be available for modest compensation, their board and room when off duty being provided by the endowment fund which is essential to the scheme.

If the plan of the Lady Minto Nursing Association of India be studied it would not be difficult to adapt it to our needs, so that working people might contribute a certain yearly sum, the payment of which enables them to obtain a nurse for a lower sum weekly than would be possible otherwise, the difference being made up to the nurse by the aforementioned endowment fund.

With such a good beginning and such a strong nursing centre the work among tuberculosis patients, and in the almshouses, and the enrollment of a large reserve corps for the Red Cross could be accomplished without nearly so great difficulty as if they were undertaken spasmodically by several small groups of women, and the county association will be making itself of use to the community as well as to its members.

We might go on and fancy a nurses' club-house and library; certainly there would be enough work to keep a county association busy for years.

The establishment of county societies, each with its central directory, means self-sacrifice of various kinds, and the only reason we have not yet attained to good county or city or community associations is because we are not yet far enough advanced in Christian kindness to give up our individual preferences for the good of the whole body.

We all like our own *alumnæ* associations, but so long as these predominate in a county, so long will the county society await its full development. We all like our own school registries, but no school registry has ever succeeded in being of so great service as a central registry.

That unity of interest which binds the nurses of a region together cannot be accomplished by the state association alone, for that is too large and meets too seldom.

The American Medical Association makes membership in the county association an essential to membership in the state and that in turn in the national. They have drawn up model constitutions for county and state associations as a means toward more uniform methods, and a field secretary is employed who goes about helping societies to reorganize. By such means more is accomplished and there is less waste of energy, time, and money.

Of our nursing organizations, only those on the Pacific Coast have followed this plan. California and Washington are organized on excellent lines. In each the county society is the unit and the membership of the state association is composed of delegates from the counties, one to every twenty-five members in Washington, one to every fifteen in California. Of course the state meetings are open as always to those who wish to attend them, but the delegates do the active work. Oregon is about to reorganize on similar lines. In these states it is necessary for a nurse to belong to some county association if she wishes admission to the state. If there is no association in her own county, she is asked to join the one nearest her.

In Washington there is a three-dollar annual fee to be paid to the county, but nothing additional to be paid by the individual nurse to the state. Instead, the counties pay into the state treasury from their funds one dollar per member.

In Minnesota and Michigan there are a few thriving county societies which have been the forerunners from which the state associations have sprung, but now that the state associations are established there is no close union between them. The membership of each is individual and unrelated except by chance. The county members are usually state members also and are interested in all state work, even to the extent of raising needed funds for its benefit.

In Ohio there are several active progressive local associations doing splendid work, but they have no direct relation to the state. In the three states last mentioned the state associations fail to receive any appreciable benefit from the local associations, or, if any, it is vastly less than if they were closely united.

In Massachusetts there is a close and rather peculiar inter-relationship between the thoroughly organized counties and the state. Membership in both is individual, but a person who joins one is by that act made a member of the other also and the dues may be paid to either.

The councillors of the state are elected from the counties or by the counties according to membership, and these councillors choose the state officers, who, in turn, ratify the election of the councillors. This is very confusing to my mind, but I am assured that it works well.

In West Virginia good county work is being done and along good lines. In New York there are a number of county societies, but the situation is confused and not at all ideal. The *alumnæ* associations are in the ascendant and the counties struggle for existence. Membership in the state society is of three kinds—individual, *alumnæ*, and county, but no one is received as an individual member if there is an *alumnæ* or county association open to her which is affiliated with the state. The state officers everywhere testify that the counties are a great aid in state work.

In order to have the county society a success professionally or socially it must have a good president, a real worker and organizer, who will gather in all the scattered nurses who should be members and enthuse them with interest and zeal for hard work.

What shall the county meetings be like? They should have three uses, business, educational, and social. The business should not be allowed to monopolize the general meetings or they will not be interesting. Better have a board of directors or an executive committee and let its members transact the business, giving faithful reports of work done, then the meetings can be devoted to other and less wearisome purposes.

For topics of discussion one of two methods may be followed: First, let the topics be wholly those of local concern connected with the lines of philanthropic or social work to be taken up or already engaged in; second, take the topics that have been presented at the last meeting of the Associated *Alumnæ*, subdivide them, and make them cover the meetings of the year.

It always seems to me a dreadful waste of good material to have such excellent papers brought before our national society, on subjects of vital interest, without a good discussion of them. If the papers read there could be followed up by the local societies in further discussion, they would not have been written in vain. One person could be selected to read the paper which forms the topic for the day, and which all have had a chance to read in the *JOURNAL*, several could follow the reading with written and well-prepared discussions, and then there should be an informal open discussion in which all take part. I believe such a plan could be worked out very successfully and interestingly and it would be better than scouring the face of the earth for brand-new topics which no one had ever heard of before. The very simplest of every-day sub-

jects are the most successful in the average society. The social part of the county society is not the least important, and should not be despised. To know one's fellow workers helps us and them.

What is the effect of the county and state associations on the individual nurse? All of us who have had the chance to step out of our own little round of interests by being sent as delegates to some of these meetings know how the horizon widens as we look about us. Doubtless you have all had such experiences. Your state meetings have drawn you out of your perplexities and prejudices, you have met and admired fine women from other schools than your own, and you have gone home with a better balanced mind and a warmer heart.

But think of the nurses throughout the state who cannot get as far from home as the state meeting. Think of the strangers among you who have no *alumnæ* association near at hand. What can you do for these? Can't you help shake them out of *their* ruts, help open *their* eyes, and broaden *their* interests by getting all the nurses of a region together in a county society and making the meeting so good and the work done so important that no one will want to miss being a part of it all?

It can't be done without some self-sacrifice. If there are flourishing city associations well established and growing, they will have to stretch their arms a little and take the whole county in. The *alumnæ* associations will have to subordinate their work a little, and throw their energies heartily into the more central body. There may be some twinges of regret, but there will be compensation. The surprising thing in this world is that a little self-forgetfulness brings so much unexpected blessing.

OBSTACLES IN THE PATH OF THE SCHOOL NURSE

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MUCH has been written of late on this problem of school nursing. It has consisted largely of academic discussions which treated of the need of the school nurse, the effects on the child, and of the waste which the neglect of the child, the most valuable of all our resources, entails to the people of this and future generations. All this is very true and very interesting and very instructive, but I beg to present a view which seems hitherto to have been overlooked—the difficulties of the situation, not from the standpoint of the scientist, or the statistician, but from